Country of Contradictions

Mexico's Transition to Modernity

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A country's transition from Cold War-era third-world dependence into competitive, global autonomy is often a difficult and complicated process. Like many other developing nations today, Mexico is meeting its fair share of stumbling blocks on its way to democracy. Mexico's fissured and conflicted present is thanks to a checkered past, rife with one-party politics and ethically dubious environmental policies. Although inching towards free-market capitalist democracy, Mexico still faces many struggles. But hope still remains for Mexico on the whole: Mexico's recently elected president, Felipe Calderon, is leading reform in both the political and environmental sectors, giving the region new hope for a stronger, more dynamic and more unified Mexico.

Since Spain took Mexico as its colony in the 16th century, a continual, internal tug-of-war between cosmopolitan modernity and rustic indigeness has occurred. Even after the Spanish liberation in 1810, Mexico fell into a long history of guerilla presidents and revolutionary idealists, further exacerbating the split between the two populations.¹

In the 1910s, Mexico regained political stability when the Socialist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) rose to power. But the PRI ruled over Mexico as the sole regime for over 70 years. This tradition of one-party politics was broken in 2000, when Vicente Fox was elected President, heralding what some believed to be "the largest internal transformation since the Revolution."² This election exemplified the dramatic political climate shift

towards democracy and free elections. Fox attempted to modernize Mexico by putting a stronger emphasis on free enterprise and private sector investments. While he set forth respectable aspirations for his country, Fox did not fully achieve his goals.

In the latest election, in 2006, the right-wing Calderon, won over his opponent, Obrador, by a slim margin. This election result was hotly debated and contentious, as Obrador refused to concede his position. In the end, however, he relented, stating that Mexico's unity is more important than any election result. Calderon's is the second freely elected president in Mexican history since the 1920s.

Calderon's objectives to modernize Mexico are similar to Fox's. He wishes to upgrade rudimentary infrastructure, improve the tax system, and encourage private investment in energy. He also wishes to create credible jobs and decrease poverty. But these objectives are hard to attain.

In addition, Calderon ambitiously vows to root out notorious drug cartels, in an attempt to lower violent crime rampant in major cities. He admits, however, that this will take longer than this tenure.

More so than improving any economic ends, however, Calderon hopes for Mexican unity, as age-old contentions between indigenous and cosmopolitan Mexicans still exist. Violent gangs, often connected to drug cartels, are waging war on city streets, which is causing social instability and additional disunity.

Yet national and social politics are not Mexico's only current problem:

environmental concerns also plague Mexico. Smog is one of its largest problems, especially in big cities. It is speculated that Mexico's low age expectancy (72 for men; 76 for women) is partially due to these smog emissions.

Another notorious environmental trouble is Mexico's water supply. Parasites live in the water, causing what is known as "Montezuma's Revenge"—a sort of dysentery.⁴ In addition to parasitic contamination, ground water is polluted, due to said smog emissions and sloppy environmental restrictions.

This has taken a toll on Mexico's ecosystem, especially where monarch butterfly migration patterns and illegal logging are concerned. The Michoacan Reforestation Fund is attempting to reforest patches of ecosystem that have been decimated for wood energy. This deforestation has interrupted the monarch butterfly's natural migration pattern, causing mass death and perhaps irreversible damage to Mexico's allover ecosystem.⁵ This Fund has met with some success—although not nearly enough, since its cause is relatively under-publicized and severely under-funded.

To combat these disparate yet important environmental issues, Mexico has created a body spanning fourteen government secretariats, called the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales—SEMARNAT. Its first summit met in 1999, where it outlined its aims "to create a State environmental protection policy reversing the tendencies of ecological deterioration and establishing the basis for

sustainable development in the country."⁶ It aims to improve upon air, water and land conservation—and may prove to be one of Mexico's greatest assets in environmental sustainability. This secretariat enjoyed increased interest with the election of Vicente Fox in 2000, but soon after slowed and did not revive until Calderon's election in 2006. A major struggle for this secretariat is disorganization at the state and municipal level, combined with resource shortage and general public apathy. For this organization to succeed, it must synthesize intergovernmental and economic resources to create a tangible effect.

Mexico's struggles are not unlike many other Central American nations in the region. For example, Mexico's nearest neighbors, Guatemala and Belize, have similar environmental concerns, internal conflict, and economic issues. Just as Mexico's problems are important to recognize now, it is likewise pertinent to realize the plight of other struggling countries in the region.

Time will tell regarding Calderon's policies. His intent to unify the country seems to be a step in a positive direction. His stress on unity could renew interest in local jobs—and could cause conflicts among tribes and city dwellers to simmer down. In addition, global interest in environmental health may help publicize SEMARNAT's aims—and thereby curry public and private economic interest. In the meantime, however, Mexico remains on the up, especially with respect to cultural contributions in film and music. But it will take time and effort to reform its shaky politics, economy and environment.

Endnotes

- 1 "CIA World Factbook: Mexico." 4 June 2007. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>>
- 2 Purnell, Jennie. "People, Religion, and Nation in Mexico From Independence Through the Revolution." *Latin American Research Review* 41.1 (2006): 222-267.
- 3 "Mexico's Drinking Water." 29 March 2001. 10 June 2007. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A520868>>
- 4 Roberts, Carmen. "Mexico logging threat to butterflies." 6 March 2006. 8 June 2007. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4779092.stm>>
- 5 "Green Plans: Mexico." 8 June 2007. <<http://greenplans.rrri.org/inaction/mexico.html>>